

Worship Series 6

“A House of Prayer”

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Luke 19:41-48

About a year ago Grant and I had planned a weekend away with friends. The plans fell through but we'd already arranged for our children to spend the weekend with extended family. So instead of few days away we unexpectedly had the house to ourselves. No kids, no interruptions. Well, you can imagine that we did what most couples who've been together for a while do when presented with this rare gift of time alone together...we worked on the house! We did long neglected projects, we cleaned out closets, we worked for hours without distraction and felt good about all we had accomplished. Then, the next day, a Sunday, we continued our radical behavior on this middle aged version of Ferris Bueller's day off and we skipped church! We read the newspaper, we had a second cup of coffee and then we headed into the big city of Charlotte for a late and leisurely breakfast and this is where the weekend got really interesting to me. We went to a popular breakfast spot and, get this, it was packed! There was a wait to be seated. Lots of people were not in church! I know, I know, you are as shocked right now as I was then. Given that you are here this morning you too will be amazed at what I discovered out there at this time on a Sunday, so let me share further what I witnessed on my reconnaissance mission into the secular Sunday world.

Not only was the restaurant packed with people of all ages, couples, families with small children, baby boomers, and young adults, when we went to the park afterwards at the 11 o'clock hour, my friends, it was overflowing with people, too! They were walking their dogs, riding their bikes, lounging under the trees with picnics, seemingly oblivious that it was the hour for Christian worship. Oblivious, even in the Bible belt, to the Sabbath. Don't ask me how I know this, but Wal-Mart was bustling with customers and there were even people lined up at Total Wine waiting for it to open at 10am that morning. I was, frankly, stunned. I said this out loud to my husband. He shook his head as if to say, "You really are a church geek, aren't you?" But here's what was even more shocking to me that rare morning that I was not in God's house of prayer at the appointed day and hour, I liked it. I liked sleeping in and reading the paper and going out for breakfast and walking in the park and gathering in provisions for the week ahead. I was almost giddy with the experience and I thought, "I could get used to this!" I could get used to not having to be anywhere at any particular time. I could get used to doing exactly what I felt like doing. I could get used to not confessing my sin, or putting my money in the plate, or being called to consider and RESPOND to all the suffering going on in the world on any given Sunday. I could get used to having Sunday morning devoted solely to me and my whims and my pleasure. And then I had another epiphany: I **COULD** get used to this.

I could get used to this not just on Sunday morning but on every morning, every day, 365 days a year. I COULD get used to it and I realized, that without God's house of prayer, I WOULD get used to it and then Jesus would be lamenting over me, too. God's house is a house of prayer, a rare place of prayer that makes for the ways of peace when we gather together and recognize that God's time of visitation is upon us. This is the place where we come to be taught by the One who both calls us and meets us here. This is the place where we are spellbound by the truly radical, life giving ways of God that aren't about our whims and our pleasures and us, but are about more than us, more that our petty wants and our

fickle self-indulgences. This house of prayer, when we don't turn it into a den of robbers, is the place where Jesus preaches and teaches and heals and forgives and saves. It is the place that enables us to see Christ not only here but out there...as we read the paper and walk in the park and work in the office and eat at the school cafeteria and shop at the Wal-Mart and without coming here, we aren't able to recognize the ways of peace out there or anywhere.

It is here that we are given the eyes to see that all of life is prayer. Prayer, at least in my humble estimation, is how we live our lives every day as those who are in covenant relationship with the Triune God. My idea of prayer used to be much more constricted. I thought of it as the Lord's Prayer or the prayer of confession or the prayer before dinner or the silent prayers I offered as I faded to sleep at night. But then something shifted for me. There came a time, a dark time, a painful time, a time that I thought might never end and I knew, even if it did end, it could not end well, and it was during that time that I could not pray in that constricted narrow way anymore. I tried, I really tried. I used devotional books that had helped me in the past. I bought new ones when the tried and true ones didn't work. I closed my eyes and willed myself to prayer and nothing would come. I woke up in the morning and resolved to pray better or harder that day and, well, I couldn't and it was then that I understood how badly I needed God's house of prayer. I needed to come to the appointed place at the appointed hour because I COULDN'T pray so I had to rely on those who gathered with me who seemingly could. I needed to hear the prayer of confession. I needed to say it. I longed for the assurance of pardon like a deer pants for water in the desert. I had to trust that others' praise and thanksgiving would carry mine to God because I couldn't articulate any on my own. During the prayers of the people I found relief in hearing that God cared for the needs of the world, and yes, our needs, too. I found hope in the promise that the Spirit intercedes in our weakness and that Jesus himself prays for us, perhaps, I thought, even, especially?, when we can't pray ourselves. And, eventually, that spellbinding teaching of Jesus took hold and I felt a sense of peace despite my lack of prayer. But without going to God's house of prayer, I'm fairly certain I would have missed the visitation of the Lord in my life. And I'm afraid I would have gotten used to that, too.

It is easy to miss reality of God right here with us because life on our own terms feels too good or it feels too awful and either way we miss the things that make for true peace in our lives and in the world. That's why we need to come to God's house of prayer, the place where Jesus preaches and teaches and heals and forgives and saves, the place where people ask for divine wisdom and cry for supernatural help and beg for abundant mercy and wrestle almost to the death for a blessing, the place where God gives all of those things so that when we leave the house of prayer we recognize Jesus not just in here but out there and then all of life, every interaction, every relationship, every mountain top experience and every wilderness journey, every breath becomes prayer because we are convicted that Jesus is with us and we are unbreakably bound to God.

Listen to the story of Ruby Bridges, the six-year-old girl African-American girl who entered a court ordered desegregated school in New Orleans in the spring of 1961. Tom Currie retells her story in his book, *Searching for the Truth*. He writes:

For days that turned into weeks and weeks that turned into months, this child had to brave murderous heckling mobs, there in the morning and there in the evening, hurling threats and slurs and hysterical denunciations and accusations. Federal marshals took her to school and brought her home. She attended school all by herself for a good part of a school year, owing to a total boycott by white families...Mobs threatened not only Ruby but her family.

But Ruby persisted...her teachers began to wonder how this six-year-old child could weather such adversity. What was the source of her serenity, her courage? One of her teachers shared the following: I was standing in the classroom, looking out the window, and I saw Ruby coming down the street, with federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there, shouting as usual. A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her; Ruby smiled at him. Then she walked up the stairs, and she stopped and turned and smiled one more time! You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob, every night before she goes to sleep. Not long after that Ruby was interviewed and asked about her prayers. "Yes," she said, "I do pray for them." Why? "Because," she replied, "I go to church every Sunday, and we're told to pray for everyone, even the bad people, and so I do." She went on to talk about her faith. "They keep coming and saying the bad words, but my momma says they'll get tired and then they'll stop coming. They'll stay home. The minister came to our house and he said the same thing, and not to worry, and I don't. The minister said God is watching and he won't forget, because he never does. The minister says if I forgive the people, and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and he'll be our protection...I'm sure God knows what's happening. He's got a lot to worry about; but there is bad trouble here, and he can't help but notice. He may not rush into anything, not right away. But there will come a day, like you hear in church.

Ruby's understanding of God had been mediated to her through the prayers of her parents and the life of a worshipping community...Ruby's life was shaped by her faith and particularly by the African-American church that supported and loved her. There she learned of this God who kept his promises and protected his children. Her pastor called upon her and prayed with her. As courageous as she was—and her courage cannot be overstated—she, nevertheless, did not walk alone, but in the company of saints who held her up in their prayers. It was the terms of the story they told her that made possible the terms of the story she lived out. (Tom Currie, *Searching for Truth*, pps. 101-103)

That's why we come to God's house of prayer, to this house of prayer, to be taught the story that shapes our story, to be held up by the prayers of the saints, to recognize the ways of peace and the One who gives us the peace that passes understanding so that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we do not fear but know that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever. I could get used to that, couldn't you?